

## The Doctrine of Total (or Pervasive) Depravity & Inability

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The teaching of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers concerning the *Total Depravity* of Man has long been distorted, reviled, and ridiculed by humanistic and worldly thinkers as something that reflects a gloomy and misanthropic contempt for the Human Race, representing an unacceptable brand of pessimism with regard to the matter of human potential for self-reformation. Indeed, even within the ranks of today's popular brand of Evangelicalism, the doctrine represents a difficulty for some professing believers.

Despite all of this, however, TRUTH is neither a matter of personal sentiment, nor a matter of popular acclamation. Rather, Doctrinal



Truth is something that is determined by its conformity to our sole Authoritative Rule of Faith—the Holy Scriptures. Despite popular disapproval, Total Depravity must be deemed not only one of the *clearest* teachings of the Bible, but also as a core-essential of the Faith.

Without a true sense of this doctrine, not only will one's entire concept of Man be distorted, (leading to wide misconceptions and practical consequences with regard to every aspect of human activity—i.e., our domestic, social, scientific, economic, and political lives, etc.), but its denial will also deform our true and deeper understanding of such matters as God & His providence, sin & salvation, grace & justice, and Divine sovereign election and predestination. Indeed, the entirely *gracious nature* of our salvation is bound in this matter (Eph. 2:1-10).

**What we DO NOT mean in using this terminology!** *Total depravity* (sometimes called *Pervasive Depravity* or *Total Inability*) is not to be regarded identified with the concept of *utter* depravity. The Doctrine does *not*, for example, maintain the position that fallen Natural Man is absolutely incapable of doing *any* form of good whatsoever. Nor does it affirm that fallen humanity is utterly destitute of *conscience* or of some degree of moral sense. Nor does the Doctrine attempt to maintain that

unsaved and unregenerate Men are as *utterly wicked* as they possibly could be (which, again, would be *utter* depravity, versus *total* depravity), or that all men are equally deficient in all areas with regard to their personal failings.

**WHAT DO we mean, then, in employing this term “Total Depravity?”** That great Genevan, the Reformer John Calvin, who perhaps possessed the single greatest theological mind amongst the Reformers, once spoke of the Doctrine in this manner:



**“All men are conceived in sin, and born the children of wrath, indisposed to all saving good, propense to evil, dead in sin, and the slaves of sin; and without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they neither are willing nor able to return to God, to correct their depraved nature, or to dispose themselves to the correction of it.”**

The concept of Total Depravity thus speaks on several different levels pertaining to the corruption of man’s moral and spiritual nature as a result of Original Sin.

**FIRSTLY**, it speaks as to the **universality** of the corruption of the Human Race; ***All*** of Mankind, as a ***total*** unit, is corrupted.

***Gen. 6:5: “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”***

**SECONDLY**, it speaks as to the **comprehensiveness** of our ***individual corruption***. No part of the individual man has been left untainted; *all* of man’s faculties and *all* aspects of his nature—indeed, his ***total Being***—has been corrupted and affected. This extensive depravity has permeated every aspect of man’s nature—physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional; his heart, mind, and conscience are tainted and perverted.

***Jer. 17:9: “The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?”***

Because no part of our nature has been left untouched by sin, no action of ours can thus be deemed wholly good in God's sight.

***Isa. 64:6: "For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away."***

As Arthur C. Custance has observed the following:

*"In so far as motive determines the moral character and spiritual significance of an act, every deed has something of sinfulness about it because man's will is fatally corrupted by his fallen nature. Not all motives are equally sinful, but no motive is wholly pure. Hence, from a moral and spiritual point of view, human activity is always poisoned as to its motive, to a greater or lesser extent. This fundamental impurity of motive is the reason for saying that man is totally depraved."*

**THIRDLY:** the concept of Total Depravity thus also embraces the concept of **total inability**: Man can do nothing in-and-of himself to achieve or initiate his personal salvation. There is absolutely nothing within man that gives him any sort of salvific merit, and furthermore, Natural Man is also utterly blind and *spiritually dead* (as opposed to merely *spiritually sick*). If a man is to be saved, God must condescendingly reach down and rescue him by initiating the process through a special work of Divine Grace, thereby regenerating the man's heart and effectually drawing him into a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

***1 Cor. 2:14: "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised."***

***Eph 2:4-5: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)..."***

***John 15:5 "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."***

Because Total Depravity is true, it follows as night follows the day that the Doctrines of *Unconditional Election* and *Irresistible* (or *Efficacious*) *Grace* are also true. Unconditional Election refers to the fact that God has unconditionally chosen a portion of the Human Race unto personal salvation in accordance with His own Sovereign plan to bring eternal glory unto Himself, and not according to any foreseen faith, merit, or ability within the Man.

***Rom 9:16: "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy."***

***Rom. 8:29-30: For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.***

Since Natural Man is spiritually *dead* in his sins, God must both *initiate process* and *effectually draw* the man to salvation. Note the declaration of Christ:

***John 6:37 "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out."***

***John 6:44 "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day."***

Thus, the principle of GRACE is completely realized in the matter of our salvation. There is nothing in which we can boast—even in our faith!

***Eph. 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."***